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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RIYADH 000295

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP JOSH HARRIS

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SUBJECT: VICE-MINISTER SAYS MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS TO TAKE
PLACE IN 10 MONTHS

Classified By: CDA David Rundell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

(C) KEY POINTS:

-- Charge d' Affaires Rundell met Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs Vice-Minister Miteib in a February 10 meeting to discuss the rumored delay of municipal elections, originally scheduled for this Spring.

-- Miteib stated that the municipal elections will take place in 10 months (December), assuming that his ministry drafts a new council charter and the Council of Ministers and Majlis Al-Shoura approve it.

-- Miteib said that the role of government in Saudi Arabia is to both lead change from within (to help Saudi society evolve and not face revolution) and also provide equity to the poor.

-- Miteib did not know if women will be allowed to run and/or vote in the future municipal elections, but noted that "this is not the most important issue."

END KEY POINTS.

COMMENT:

11. (C) Miteib holds a Ph.D. in Government Administration from George Washington University. He is not someone whom the Al-Sauds placed in the job to stop progress, but rather to pragmatically achieve greater political "evolution" from within. Miteib wants balanced change, preserving the core values of Islam while also helping Saudi Arabia evolve from a transitional to a politically developed state.

12. (C) Miteib convincingly demonstrated that he wants municipal councils to work and evolve, but for the change to be gradual. He understands the difficulties municipal councils face; Miteib himself helped write the first council charter. He also grasps that as the councils evolve they need better guidelines if they are to function effectively. He exhibited a clear understanding of the role that municipal councils can play in Saudi political transformation. Even if Miteib's response on women's participation was lacking, he clearly showed strong intellectual and emotional commitment to the councils' ultimate success. END COMMENT.

SUMMARY

13. (C) In a February 10 meeting between CDA Rundell and Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MoMRA) Vice-Minister Mansour bin Miteib, the two discussed the role of government in Saudi society, the future of municipal elections, the role of the municipal councils, and the prospects for women's suffrage and candidacy in the upcoming elections. Miteib discussed the two roles of government: first to lead change

from within, and second to provide equity to those who are "less fortunate." He stated that the municipal elections should occur in ten months, assuming his ministry completes a new draft of the council charter and the Council of Ministers and Majlis Al-Shoura approve it.

14. (C) Miteib presented several problems with the current councils: how the councils can challenge the king's appointed city manager (similar but not exactly the same as a city mayor), who will vote, and how districts are drawn. Miteib stated that he did not know whether women will vote or run in the upcoming election, noting that this is not one of the most important issues the councils face. END SUMMARY

TWO ROLES OF GOVERNMENT: LEAD CHANGE AND PROVIDE EQUITY

15. (C) Miteib stated that change is a part of life, and the choice of government is either to evolve or face revolution. The first role of the Saudi Arabian Government (SAG) is to help political evolution. However, to achieve an evolving society without violence and unwanted change, there needs to be stability. As the role of the state is to lead change, change "cannot come from outside." Here Miteib noted that many in Saudi Arabia were "relieved" by the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. Presidency, and encouraged by his early outreach to the Muslim world. He continued that many Saudis were tired of and "feared the Bush administration and its efforts to impose American values" upon Saudi Arabia.

16. (C) Miteib argued that the second role of government is

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to provide equity. Saudi Arabia is a free economy where the wealthy obtain education, security, and other goods and services on their own through wealth. The role of government is to provide these services for those who cannot afford them. However, Miteib noted that the problem for Saudi Arabia is defining who the "poor" are. Because there is no income tax in Saudi Arabia, there is no way to tell who are "less well off" and hence properly provide equity to those who deserve it.

MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: EXPECTED IN TEN MONTHS

17. (C) When asked about the rumors of municipal council election delays, Miteib stated that he expects the elections to take place when the terms of the current members expire in ten months (December). He noted that the reason for the rumors of delay is that the MoMRA is drafting a new council charter. He said that if this charter is not completed, including approval by the Council of Ministers and Majlis Al-Shoura, then he is not sure how to proceed on elections. The plan currently is to have the charter in place within ten months so that new elections can occur under the new charter rules.

18. (C) CDA asked how the new charter is being drafted, with Miteib responding that the United Nations, the German government, and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) are assisting its development. Miteib also mentioned that the MoMRA is coordinating IT improvements in the municipalities, with the goal of having websites with information and resources for each municipality available to the public. Miteib also expressed a keen desire to repeat last year's IV program for staff and members of municipal councils to visit the United States for training.

WHAT EXACTLY IS THE ROLE OF MUNICIPAL COUNCILS?

19. (C) Elaborating on the drafting of the new council

charter, Miteib stated that the reason for a new charter stems from several problems with the old one. For example, the current charter states that the role of the council is to "monitor" the city government (appointed by the king). Does that mean the council can hire the head of a municipality, fire him, or investigate him? Or must they take a back seat to the city government and accept all of its actions? Miteib made clear that these issues, relating to the balance between the elected portion of the councils and the members and head who are appointed by the king, need to be re-defined.

¶10. (C) Miteib then turned to a general conversation on the importance of municipal councils. He argued that Saudi Arabia is a transitional society, while the United States is a developed society. He stated that in the United States people of different opinions can resolve arguments without violence. However, this is not true for Saudi Arabia because it is still in a politically transitional phase. As a result, progress towards a developed society must include balance, and municipal councils are a method to achieve this.

He argued that the ability to allow local citizens avenues for discourse and grievance, as well as political participation through elections, are steps away from solving disagreements through violence and steps towards greater political evolution. Miteib clearly sees these councils as not absolute good, but rather methods by the government to allow Saudi political evolution, the solution to avoiding revolution.

WOMEN AND ELECTIONS: "NOT MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE"

¶11. (C) CDA asked if one of the election changes under the new charter will be for women to vote or run as candidates. Miteib responded, "I don't know." He stated that there are other "important issues" to consider, such as whether the military should vote and a minimum age for voting. He stated the age currently being considered ranges from 18 to 23. (Note: in the previous election law which governed the municipal elections in 2005, the MoMRA did not allow members of the military to vote and the minimum voting age was 18. End note.) He argued that the most complicated issue is whether or not these councils will be "at large" or separated by district, and if separated by district how many districts in each municipality.

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¶12. (C) Miteib explained more generally on the issue of women's rights by stating that the foundation of Saudi Arabia is Islam, while the foundation of the United States is secularism. He argued that Islam defines the role of women differently than does secularism. What this means is that issues such as women driving are not fundamental to "our society," as opposed to many in the U.S. who believe this to be a "fundamental right." Hence, the SAG and USG view on "the role of women will never be the same."
MUENCH